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Daly, Charles Patrick.

A consideration of the objection to the stage.



A CONSIDERATION
OF THE
OBJECTIONS TO THE STAGE

FROM THE EARLIEST PERIOD
AND THE CONCLUSION IT WARRANTS

BEING THE CONCLUDING PART OF THE DUNLAP
SOCIETY'S PUBLICATION ENTITLED

WHEN WAS THE DRAMA FIRST INTRODUCED
IN AMERICA?

BY
CHARLES P. DALY, LL. D.



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A CONSIDERATION OF THE OBJECTIONS
MADE TO THE STAGE.

THIS supplement began with the statement that among the earliest information that we possess respecting the drama in America, is a passage in a letter objecting to the performance of a play, and it may be appropriately closed by a brief enumeration of the objections generally made to the theater, and the conclusion that seems to follow from a review of them.

It is a characteristic of those who object to the theater altogether that they rarely, if ever, give any consideration to the origin of the drama, to its long continuance, or appreciate that it will continue as long as civilization continues, and this applies as well to those who have written elaborate treatises against it, like Jeremy Collier, as to those who object to it generally. The briefest form of stating this consideration is that the theater has its origin in human nature. In the researches made as to its origin it is found that it has sprung up spontaneously among different peoples, and has not been transmitted by one people more advanced in civilization to another that was less so. Thus the rise of the drama, such as it is, in India and in China has in no way been influenced by the Greeks, who carried the cultivation of it to a higher degree than any other people of antiquity. The oldest civilization with which we are acquainted is that of Egypt. Whether it existed among the Egyptians, whether they had what we call a theater, the extensive researches

that have been made within the present century so far as I have been able to ascertain do not indicate,* but that it existed at a very early period in China, in Persia, and in India we have ample evidence, and in China and India it has from its beginning been a recreation greatly enjoyed by the people; to which may be added as a general observation that certain races have more aptitude for the enjoyment of it than others, and greater natural capacity either as a gift from nature or for acquiring what is requisite in the actor or dramatist. That some men are endowed by nature in a higher degree than others with the qualities that make a man eminent as a dramatist or an actor is sufficiently indicated in the one case by Shakespeare, and in the other by Garrick, of the latter of whom it may be said, in the language of Mr. Baker, the historian of the London stage, that "without any previous apprenticeship, preparation, or drudgery, at a remote end of the town that had hitherto been as unknown to fashion as the wilds of Africa, without preliminary puffing of any kind,

* I consulted Dr. Dickerman, the most eminent Egyptologist in this country, upon this subject, and his observation was this: The state of mind and the condition of society of the ancient Egyptians were not such as would incline them to theatrical representations. They had athletic sports, games, such as draughts or checkers, and games of chance, but not such a disposition as brought people together to witness anything. None of the buildings whose ruins have been studied indicate that any were constructed with reference to the assembling of people, except the processions, with priests, in the temples, and that the Labyrinth, moreover, in the twelfth dynasty, contemporary with Abraham, had meetings of the delegates from the different nomes, or provinces, to discuss the political affairs of the kingdom.

he took the whole play-going public by storm, made men old in prejudice forget the idols of their youth and like Pope confess that he never had his equal. * * * From "Richard III." to "Abel Drugger," from "King Lear" to "Don Felix," from "Macbeth" to "Bayes," his tragic force, his keen sense of humor, his marvelous genius carried everything before it; and this combination of equal excellence, and in the highest degree, in both tragedy and comedy is the more remarkable, for the two great Roman actors, Roscius in comedy and Æsopus in tragedy, never crossed the limits of their respective branches, and both reached the preëminence they attained by the most careful and assiduous study. It is said of Roscius that, in the very height of his reputation, he did not even venture upon a gesture that he did not carefully consider and practise in private, and yet, notwithstanding this elaborate study, there was no mannerism or affectation in his acting, but everything he did seemed natural to the character he represented; and having referred to these two great Roman actors, it may be mentioned, as an example of being endowed like Garrick with qualities that enable him who possesses them to soar easily and at once to the highest reach of his art, that Terence, the most elegant, subtle, and felicitous in expression of the Roman comic dramatists, is supposed, his biography being but imperfectly known, to have been born a slave, who at the age of twenty-seven offered his first play, the "Andria," to the conductors of the theatrical exhibitions, who referred him to an eminent playwright of Rome for its examination, where, unknown and meanly clad,

he read, seated upon a low stool, his opening scene, afterwards declared by Cicero to be a model of narrative, and his genius was at once recognized.*

Cæsar called him a half Menander, who was the Greeks' ideal of a perfect comic dramatist, regarding him in comedy, as they did Sophocles in tragedy, as the most complete and finished; whose judgment we accept, as no play of Menander, though he is said to have written about a hundred comedies, has come down to us, but only fragments. And Plautus, the other distinguished Roman dramatist, should also be mentioned as a further illustration, for he left the humble employment of turning a mill to become a writer of plays, and surpassed Terence in native comic force, his gift in that direction being as great as Shakespeare's or Molière's.

There is one pervading feature of the drama to which those who have written against it seldom refer, and some of the most prominent not at all, that the stage is, what the age is, or, as Shakespeare has succinctly expressed it in *Hamlet's* speech to the players, "that the purpose of playing, both at the first and now, was and is, as 't were, to hold the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the *very age* and body of the time his form and *pressure*," and to *Polonius*, in respect to the players, that "they are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time."

If a people are alike brave and greatly cultivated, as the Athenians were when the drama reached to its high-

* Smith's Dictionary, Vol. iii, p. 997.

est attainment among them, they witness with pleasure the reproduction of noble deeds, and listen with delight to the inculcation of noble sentiments from such masters of the dramatic art as Euripedes and Sophocles, and realize with great enjoyment the power that lies in ridicule as a means of reforming public abuses and correcting deformities in the character of individuals when it comes from such a satirist and wit as Aristophanes. But when a nation is sinking into decay or deteriorating, the stage deteriorates with it; or when a people find their highest enjoyment in amusements that are coarse or brutal, like the Romans, who thronged the amphitheater to witness the sanguinary combat of gladiators, the "maddening excitement of the circus";* or found pleasure in such a spectacle as beholding the arena filled with wild beasts, tearing each other to pieces — the performances of the theater, though of a different kind, became, in time, of the like degraded character, and stirred up against the drama its greatest, longest, and most unrelenting enemy — the Chris-

* Gibbon says the Roman people considered the circus as their home, their temple, and the seat of the republic. The impatient crowd rushed at the dawn of day to secure their places; and there were many who passed sleepless and anxious nights in the adjacent porticos. From the morning to the evening, careless of the sun or of the rain, the spectators, who sometimes amounted to the number of four hundred thousand, remained in eager attention; their eyes fixed on the horses and charioteers, their minds agitated with hope and fear, for the success of the colors which they espoused and the happiness of Rome appeared to hang on the event of a race. "Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*," Vol. iv. pp. 87, 88. London edition of 1848.

tian Church. A warfare against it, at that time, on the part of the Church, that was necessary for the preservation of society ; for in the period which Gibbon, in his great contribution to English literature, distinguishes as the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, the stage sank lower than it ever was before, or has ever been since.

St. Augustine, writing in the beginning of the fourth century, in an article of great severity against the theater, with whose abuses he was no doubt thoroughly familiar in his wild youth, says: "The theaters, those cages of uncleanness and public schools of debauchery, are tumbling almost everywhere," which was the fact, as stationary places of amusement in cities or towns. And Tertullian, who wrote at the end of the second century, says even the very magistrates who abet the stage discountenance the players, stigmatize their character, and cramp their freedom. "The whole tribe of them," he says, "is thrown out of all power and privilege. They are neither suffered to be lords or gentlemen, to come within the Senate, or to harangue the people."* And yet the Church, with all its efforts and all the power the law gave it, could not suppress the players, for so deeply implanted is the love for the dramatic art, alike in those whose vocation it is to represent it and those who find enjoyment in seeing it, that it continued thereafter, in some form or other, under the names of mimes, masques, drolls, and other titles, to be exhibited throughout the

* Collier, 256, 1st. ed.

different countries of Europe by a strolling class of itinerants, under the various names of gleemen, minstrels, joculators, and other titles, on the village green, in the hall or courtyard of the castle, in the city street,—a movable stage for the players being all that was necessary,—and especially at the fairs, those gatherings of the Middle Ages for commercial purposes, when amusement was one of the attractions, whether it was a local fair in a town, or one of those gatherings of people from many countries as at Beaucaire, in France.

But while the Church did not and could not suppress the practitioner, as he was then called, of the “gay science,” it made him, for more than a thousand years, a wanderer and a vagabond. The consolation which religion affords to support us in our trials, cares, and troubles in this life was denied him, except so far as he could find it solely within himself; for he could participate in none of those rites or acts of religious observance which the Church administers, and the believer relies on, for securing a happy life hereafter. Upon his death-bed no mark was made upon his forehead as the Church’s signet of his repentance and hope of redemption, nor could he lie in consecrated ground. If a woman who had been baptized married a player, she was excommunicated; and so were any of the laity who went to any such performances on a Sunday or a holiday, these being the only days when the working classes, after doing their duty by attending mass, had leisure for recreation.

After several centuries the Church, with a sagacity it has frequently shown, finding that it could not suppress

the players — that in all countries they had the countenance and support of the common people, who, unable to acquire knowledge by reading, except in very rare instances, quickly comprehended a dramatic representation, and that it made a great impression upon them,—determined to make use of the very thing it had continued to denounce for centuries,—a play, as an instrument in the hands of the Church for spreading and more deeply impressing religion upon the unlettered classes, who then constituted the great bulk of the community, by a representation, through its instrumentality, of the miracles that had been wrought for the faith. This afterwards was extended to the representation of the passion of Christ and religious subjects generally, not only what appertained to the history of the Church but to what was theological, under the titles of miracle plays, mysteries, and moralities, to which a recent writer has felicitously given the general name of the monastic drama.* This resort to plays as a means of religious teaching was especially the case from the tenth to the twelfth century. Monasteries and convents, where the name of a play had been previously an abomination, now became active centers in the production, preparation, and representation of these mysteries and moralities on the part of monks and nuns. They were written and acted by ecclesiastics, and when they were given — as they frequently were — in churches, a bishop presided at the performance, with his miter on and pastoral staff in hand. Even nuns wrote plays, the Benedictine

* Prof. A. W. Ward.

nun Hrotsvith, of Saxony, in the tenth century, being celebrated for her plays, which were distinguishable for their purity in respect to religion and morals, her knowledge of human nature, and the dramatic interest she could impart to a scene. As the object was to attract the common people as much as possible, and to do this it was necessary to amuse and interest as well as to instruct them, these representations were not limited to the serious or solemn, but were freely interspersed with what was comic or amusing. When the devil, and his attendant, named Vice, two characters that were frequently represented in the action of the play, were confounded by some witty retort, made ridiculous by a happy thrust of humor, or were outwitted in their design by some clever trick, it may be assumed that the sleek friar and the kindly nun laughed as heartily as any of the audience. In the tenth century a miracle play called "The Deluge" was performed, in which Noah's wife refuses to go into the ark,—being represented, as it would appear, as regarding it only as a shower,—and boxes her husband's ears when he attempts to compel her to; this display of feminine pertinacity being what in theatrical parlance is regarded as a hit. And in the twelfth century the Merchant Drapers' Company of London represented in a miracle play the Creation, and, that the representation might be exact, our first parents appeared on the stage without any covering whatever, which the Drapers' Company, I suppose, regarded as appropriately illustrating the necessity for that which the merchant draper supplies; for I remember that at the celebration

in 1825 in New York of the completion of the Erie Canal the tailors marched in that great procession with a huge banner, in which Adam and Eve were represented in a like condition, with the words beneath, "Ye were naked and we clothed you."

The first theater in modern times, by which I mean a permanent structure for such a purpose, in a fixed place, was erected in Paris about the year 1400, by a body known as the *Confraire de la Passion de N. S.*, for the representation of the Scriptural mysteries. But solemn as was the name given by the founders and their purpose in building this theater, it would appear that in the course of time it had to yield to the comic and the amusing, as much, and probably more than the miracle plays, mysteries and moralities that had been long established, for in the middle of the next century, that is in 1547, it was suppressed by the Parliament for the scandal it created by what Hallam calls "this devout buffoonery."

These religious plays, however limited, extended, or different they may have been, it appears to be conceded, gave rise to the modern drama, and I think it very possible that the existence of the comic and the tragic in the same play, which we find so marked in Shakespeare, and which is so much nearer to what takes place in life than the French classical drama of Corneille and Racine, may have been suggested to Shakespeare by these early religious plays in which both were combined, which he may frequently have witnessed, and probably did, as a boy.

But although this use of the drama was an aid to

the Church, that circumstance in no way affected or lessened the Church's attitude toward the players who acted profane plays, farces, interludes, or gave any kind of dramatic entertainment of that description. It was right to employ it on behalf of the Church, but to make any other use of it was sinful and unlawful. So the player, or common player, as he was called, to distinguish him from the histrionic assistant of the Church, remained as he was before. So late even as the thirty-ninth year of Elizabeth's reign, a statute was passed declaring that common players should be taken and adjudged to be rogues, vagabonds, and sturdy beggars, etc., etc., and be subject to the penalties therein provided, which Jeremy Collier declares were "infamous to the last degree, and capital, too, unless they give over," that is, were punishable with death. But a reservation was made in favor of players that belonged to a baron or other personage of high degree, who were authorized to play under his signature and seal, by which an opening was left for the rise and development of the great era in the dramatic history of England that followed.

Notwithstanding, however, the persecution, penalties, hardships, and sufferings to which the common players were subject, they clung to their vocation with a tenacity that showed how strong was their affection for it; that it was not only a means of livelihood, but the one of all others they preferred, for to impart pleasure is as much of an enjoyment as to receive it. But persistent as was this degradation of the players, the Church and the law had to yield at last to the in-

evitable. But how long this was in coming about, or how long the effect of it prevented the player from being recognized as on the same level with the rest of his fellow-men, may be illustrated by the well-known anecdote of Garrick, when a chimney-sweep called out to his fellow, "There goes Garrick the player," and his companion responded, "Hush, you don't know what you may come to yourself."

When we examine those treatises that have been written against the stage, the material upon which they rely is almost invariably derived from its abuse, without considering that that abuse is not due to the theater as an institution, but to the state of society that gives rise to it. Some writers are broad-minded enough to make this discrimination; but the bulk of them do not, which this contrast will sufficiently illustrate. Tertullian, writing about the beginning of the third century, writes thus of the stage: "What, though the performance may be in some measure pretty and entertaining — what, though innocence, yes, and virtue, too, shines through some part of it! It is not the custom to prepare poison unpalatable, nor make up ratsbane with rhubarb and senna. No, to have the mischief speed, they must oblige the senses and make the dose pleasant. Thus, the devil throws in a cordial drop to make the draught go down, and steals some ingredients from the dispensary of heaven. In short, look upon all the engaging sentences of the stage — their flights of fortitude and philosophy, the loftiness of their style, the music of the cadence, and the fineness of the conduct! Look upon it only, I say, as honey

dropping from the bowels of a toad, or the bag of a spider."* And fourteen hundred years afterward a discrimination was made in a sermon by Archbishop Tillotson, one of the most eminent of English divines, denouncing the licentiousness of the English stage as it then existed, and the plays that were acted, as a reproach to the nation, which was true; but in which he says that to denounce the stage in general would not be just or reasonable; for, he continues, "it is very possible that they" (the plays) "might be so framed, and governed by such rules as not only to be innocently diverting, but instructing and useful; to put some vices and follies out of countenance, which cannot, perhaps, be so decently reprov'd nor so effectually exposed and corrected in any other way." But examples like Tillotson's, at least in England, have been rare. Even the great Bossuet, as he has been called, one of, if not the most distinguished of, French pulpit orators, and a prominent theological writer, was an example of the opposite. An actor having some scruples of conscience respecting his continuing in his profession, consulted a priest named Caffaro, who, by his reasoning, appears not only to have removed the actor's scruples, but wrote a defense of the stage, which, not being desirous of being known as the author, he published anonymously; and when it was ascertained that he was the writer of it, the Archbishop of Paris threatened to suspend him; and Bossuet wrote a pastoral letter exhorting him to repent his mistake, and rescind his

* Jeremy Collier's "View of the English Stage," 1st ed., p. 258.

mischievous opinions, which the priest accordingly did.*

While the stage may and does much to maintain a healthy moral feeling in society, in the powerful effect that is produced by the dramatic representation of virtuous deeds and of guilty actions, and the consequences that attend the latter, as an institution the theater does not retard society in its downward course, but may be said rather to accelerate it. The players depend for their support upon public patronage, and therefore court public favor, as when a nation through luxury, or those causes that bring about national decay and the consequences that follow it, or where a reaction takes place, as it did in England from the reign of puritanism to the restoration of the monarchy under Charles II., and from the example set by the restored monarch, society, or rather what is called high society, as a class, becomes corrupt and licentious, the theater caters to the taste of those who are its chief patrons, as the theaters did then by the production and representation mainly of comedies in which, as Dr. Johnson expressed it, "the plot was an intrigue, and the wit indecency," and, as respects some of these comedies, indecency might be extended to the word filth.

That great epoch that is distinguished as the Elizabethan drama, which includes some of the highest efforts of the human intellect, is embraced within the narrow limits of fifty-five years — or from Marlowe to

* Bossuet's Works, Vol. xxxii. Calcraft's "Defence of the Stage," p. 12.

Shirley — that is, from the first representation of Marlowe's "Tamerlane," in 1587, to the year 1642, when the act of Parliament was passed forbidding the acting of plays in any part of England, upon which Shirley ceased to write. It would seem to have begun to decline in Ben Jonson's life, for in the dedication to his play of "The Fox" he says at that date, 1607, respecting the theater, "that nothing but ribaldry, profanation, and blasphemy was practised," and in respect to himself, that he could with a clear conscience affirm that he "loathed the use of such foul and unwashed bawdry as is now made the food of the scene." *

However this may have been, the condition of the stage had become such as to arouse the opposition of the puritans, and in 1633 William Prynne, a puritan barrister of Lincoln's Inn, published a large volume which he called "Histrio-Mastix. The Players' Scourge, or the Actors' Tragedy, in two books, in which it is largely evidenced by divers arguments that popular stage plays are sinful, heathenish, lewd, and ungodly spectacles," a book more remarkable for the extensive erudition of the author, or rather for his industry in bringing such a mass of materials together, than for his arguments, which I shall not pause now to enumerate, as they can be considered hereafter with those of subsequent writers in the concrete, being all of the same general character, and founded almost exclusively upon the abuses of the stage.

He was persecuted by the government for the pub-

* Gifford's "Jonson," Vol. iii., pp. 162, 163.

lication of this work and heavily punished, not so much, it was said, for what he had written against the stage, as for passages in it that it was assumed were intended to reflect upon Charles I. and his queen, Henrietta Maria. The queen and her ladies had taken part in the performance of a play, and a passage in the book reflecting upon actresses in general was construed as an aspersion upon her, and a reference to Nero and other tyrants who had failed to suppress the plays was supposed to have been aimed at the king. He was tried in the Star Chamber and sentenced to be put in the pillory, to have his ears cut off and be branded on the cheek with the letters S. L. (signifying Seditious Libeller), expelled from Lincoln's Inn, deprived of his degree in the University of Oxford, and his book was ordered to be burned by the common hangman, to all of which was added a fine of £5,000, a large sum at that day, and he was imprisoned for life, all of which was vigorously carried out as far as it could be. Upon the overthrow of Charles I. he was released by Parliament, the sentence against him was declared to have been illegal, a sum of money was voted to him by way of restitution, and, being a great favorite with the people, alike from his sufferings and his writings, he was elected a member of Parliament, where, strangely enough, he became a strong antagonist of Cromwell and was in turn imprisoned by his own party, became an advocate for the monarchy, was rewarded after the Restoration by the office of Keeper of the Records of the Tower, and dedicated one of his works to Charles II.

He is said to have written more than two hundred

books, a remarkable instance of fecundity, though many were, as I suppose, mere tracts or pamphlets. And this curious incident in the history of literature in respect to one of them, his work against the stage, "Histrio-Mastix," may be mentioned: that sixteen years after it was published, that is in 1649, the year in which Charles I. was executed, an unknown writer, with a view of depriving it of whatever influence it may have had, published a book entitled "William Prynne, His Defence of Stage Plays, a Retraction of a former work of his called Histrio-Mastix." It would, indeed, have been curious if a man who had written so bitterly as he had against the stage, and had accumulated and printed such a mass of learning to support the attack upon it, should have retracted all he had said and come out as the author of a work in defense of the stage. But it was a forgery; Prynne published afterwards what is called a broadside, entitled "Mr. Prynne's Vindication of himself from being the author of The Defence of Stage Plays."

It will not be necessary in a brief review like this to refer to what many eminent men have said in favor of the stage, as my purpose has been to consider the objections made against it, and it is the less necessary as it has already been admirably done by John W. Calcraft, manager of the Theater Royal of Dublin, in a volume entitled "A Defence of the Stage," published in that city in 1839. Calcraft was not only a manager of a theater, but a man with a large amount of information respecting the history of the drama, and a good classical scholar, who was able to consult the authori-

ties when requisite in the original. He prefixes at the beginning of the book a list of those he cites or quotes in it in favor of the stage, which, independent of literary men and other writers, contains four cardinals, nine archbishops, fourteen bishops, and forty-six divines, and among them are some of the most eminent names in the church, as St. Thomas Aquinas, called the Angelic Doctor, Albertus Magnus, St. Antoninus, Archbishop of Florence, Melanchthon, and Martin Luther, the latter of whom writes: "of all amusements the theater is the most profitable"; and it further appears, on the authority of Baker's *Biographia Dramatica*, that more than one hundred clergymen in England have written plays. Calcraft also gives a remarkable illustration of an attempt to carry out what writers against the stage have earnestly advocated, the entire suppression of the theater, as if all mankind were made like themselves, or were capable of being made so. Charles Borromeo, Archbishop of Milan, in his zeal for the security of the public morals, "shut up the play-house and expelled the players, strollers, and minstrels as debauchers and corrupters of mankind, but soon had reason to alter his opinion, for he found that the people ran into all manner of excesses, and that, wanting something to amuse them, they committed the most horrid crimes by way of pastime. On this account he repented of his edict, recalled the banished players, and granted them a free use and liberty of the stage."

The licentiousness of the theater after the Restoration had become such as to call for some leading mind to appeal to the body of the English people, who were

then, as they have always been, a strong race to bestir themselves in the cause of public morality, and such a one was found in the Rev. Jeremy Collier, a man of learning and ability, who, in 1698, published what he called "A Short View of the Immorality and Profanity of the English Stage, together with the Sense of Antiquity upon this Argument," which brought about a reformation as rapid as it was thorough. About one half the book was devoted to the English stage as it then existed, and its contrast with that of antiquity, very much to the discredit of the former, and to those who were then thought so highly of as comic dramatists. Collier was a fine classical scholar, and so familiar with the Greek dramatists and with Terence and Plautus among the Romans, as well as with all the leading comedies produced after the Restoration, that he was able to compare these comedies, passage by passage, with the Latin and Greek dramatists, and thereby furnish unanswerable proof, not only of their inferiority, but of the degraded character of the plays then produced on the English stage, when compared with the productions of the Greek and Roman dramatists. He showed in respect to the stage, in different chapters, its immodesty, its profaneness, its ridicule of the clergy, and its encouragement of immorality so completely that there was no replying to it. Dryden, who was a leading playwright at the time, yielded at once, not attempting to defend himself; on the contrary, he even thanked Collier for his treatment of him, complaining only of his roughness. Congreve undertook to reply, but it was a failure, and that he felt that

Collier was right appears in the fact that in a subsequent edition of his plays he left out many offensive passages.

Collier's strength lay in the truth of what he said about the condition of the English stage at that time, and in the fact that he was a learned man, which, in itself, inspired respect, and enabled him to cope with any general scholar who should attempt to answer him. The result was, that his book aroused the people, and the nation went with him in effecting a reform that has lasted ever since.

But he did not confine himself to the immorality and profanity of the English stage, but extended his attack to the stage in general. He devoted the latter part of his book to copious quotations from pagan writers, from the fathers of the church, and from the laws that had to be passed respecting plays, to show, as he expressed it, that they "had generally been looked upon as the nurseries of vice, the corrupters of youth, and the grievance of the country where they are suffered." It was my impression at first that a man so thoroughly well informed respecting the history of the theater in antiquity could discriminate between its use and its abuse as its condition was then in England, and that he made his assault upon it general that it might have more effect than if he admitted any qualification whatever, in the expectation that its chief patrons, who were then what are called the higher classes, would cease to attend the representation of these comedies whose immorality and profaneness he had so unanswerably shown, and that in time by this means the

theater would gradually correct itself. But a more careful perusal of the book, and a consideration of the labor he bestowed in getting together whatever he could find from any source against it as an institution, show that his aim was the impossible — to abolish the theater altogether — that he was in full accord with the pithy St. Augustine that sinners “fancy the world goes wonderfully well when people make a figure; when a man is a prince in his fortune and a beggar in his virtue; has a great many fine things about him, but not so much as one good quality to deserve them; when the play-house goes up and religion goes down; when prodigality is admired and charity is laughed at; when the players can revel with a rich man’s purse and the poor man has scarcely enough to keep soul and body together”; and with St. Hierom in his caution to ladies to have “nothing to do with the play-house, because it sets all humors at work, caresses the fancy, and makes pleasure a conveyance to destruction.”

Collier divides this portion of his subject into three parts: the opinion of philosophers, orators, poets, and historians of antiquity; the opinion of the church; and that of the state as shown in the laws enacted against theaters. In making these quotations he frequently does what some advocates do, quotes so much as supports his argument and omits what qualifies or limits it. Thus, when he quotes from Plutarch that plays are dangerous to corrupt young people, and when they grow bawdy or licentious they should be checked, he omits the further observation of the great biographer, that he thought plays useful to polish the manners and instil

the principles of virtue,* and, while giving what Cicero says of licentious plays as an authority against the institution of the theater, makes no mention of the fact that Roscius was an intimate friend of Cicero, and that it is to Cicero we are chiefly indebted for our knowledge of the greatness of the Roman actor and of the purity of his private life.

In considering the objections that have been made to the stage, it will not be necessary to particularize them, as they are founded almost entirely upon its abuses, in respect to which it is sufficient to say that nearly all things have their abuses; and, as Calcraft put it, to insist that the stage should be abolished and its *use* denied because of its *abuse* would be about as reasonable as to denounce the pulpit because there have been rebellious and heterodoxical preachers; to proscribe the bench because there have been corrupt and unjust judges, and periods of the venal administration of the judiciary; or dispense with the art of printing because by its means immoral books have been circulated. This will dispense with the necessity of enumerating the objections made by subsequent writers, such as the Rev. Arthur Bedford, Bossuet, Witherspoon, Law, and a few others, the first of whom, Bedford, published, in 1719, what he called "A Serious Remonstrance in behalf of the Christian Religion against the horrid blasphemies, and impurities, which are still used in the English Playhouses, being a new edition of the Evil of Stage Plays," in which he is said to have cited seven thousand lewd

* Calcraft, p. 61.

and criminal passages out of plays of the then current century, displaying, in my opinion, rather a prurient curiosity than a labor on behalf of public morality, on the part of a clergyman who might have been better employed; and as respects what has been advanced by other writers against the theater as an institution, that is concisely, energetically, and fully expressed in Collier's final conclusion, the whole of which I shall not give in detail, but sufficient to state what it was.

"My conclusion," he says, "is let nobody go to the Infamous *Play House*, A place of such staring contradiction to the Strictness and Sobriety of Religion A Place hated by God and haunted by the Devil. Let no man I say learn to relish any thing that's said there; For 'tis all but poison handsomely prepared." He objects to plays as "dilating so much on the passion of love, which is a cunning way of stealing on the blind side and practising upon the weakness of human nature," that "people love to see their passions painted no less than their persons, that recommends the business of amours and engages inclination. It forms passions where it does not find them. Love has a parley within, and when the wax is prepared the impression is easily made, and when these passions are born they thrive extremely in that nursery. They grow strong, and when the passions are up in arms there is a mighty contest between duty and inclination." He further objects to plays as encouraging the passion of revenge as nothing is more common in their action than duels or quarrels among the leading characters. "Practices" he says, "that are infamous in reason, capital in law, and

damnable in religion, are to the credit of the stage, and Rage and Resentment, Blood and Barbarity are deified." "What must we say," he continues, "of the more foul representations, of all the impudence in language and gesture, can this stuff be the inclination of ladies? Is vice so entertaining, and do they love to see the stews depicted before them. One would think the dishonor of their own Sex the Discovery of so much lewdness, and the treating of Human Nature so very coarsely could have little satisfaction in it." . . . Call you this Diversion? Can Profaneness be such an irresistible Delight? . . . Is the Scorn of Christianity the Entertainment of Christians? Is it such a pleasure to hear the Scriptures burlesqued? Is Ribaldry so very obliging and Atheism so charming a Quality? Are we indeed willing to quit the Privilege of our Nature; to Surrender our Charter of Immortality and throw up the Pretenses to another Life?" And he winds up his conclusion in these words: "In short: Nothing can be more disserviceable to Probity and religion than the management of the *stage*. It cherishes those Passions, and rewards those Vices which 'tis the business of Reason to discountenance. It strikes at the Root of Principle draws off the Inclinations from Virtue and spoils good Education, 'tis the most effectual means to baffle the Force of Discipline, to emasculate people's Spirits and Debauch their Manners."

It is sufficient to say in answer to all this, that an examination of the history of the English and American stage for the two hundred years that have elapsed since these words were written, shows that it

has had no such effect, that it has been a rational source of amusement that has been beneficial and not injurious to society. It is the most attractive of all amusements, and that this attraction, as an amusement, has continued to increase, or, at least, has not diminished, would seem to appear from the number of theaters there is now in London, in New York, in Paris, and in other cities of Europe.

It is notable that plays which combine enjoyment with a healthy moral effect are now very much liked, such as Denman Thompson's "Old Homestead," Mr. Herne's "Shore Acres," and Mr. John Hare's "Pair of Spectacles," and plays of a like character that have within the present period been produced in the city of New York by these three managers, Messrs. Augustin Daly, Dan'l Frohman, and A. M. Palmer; and that a taste in this country has been widely diffused for what is exalted in the drama, is found in the fact that crowded audiences, for a hundred nights consecutively, went to see Edwin Booth perform the principal part in a tragedy of so high a character as Shakespeare's "Hamlet."

Another feature in this history of the last two centuries, and especially since the days of John Kemble, and his distinguished sister, Mrs. Siddons, is that the player is no longer a wandering vagabond, or one looked down upon because his sole vocation in life is to minister to our pleasures, but one who is as much respected as any other member of the community, unless he does something individually to forfeit that respect. No player at the present day has,

in respect to his vocation, to exclaim against fortune as Shakespeare did in his 99th sonnet :

The guilty goddess of my harmful deeds,
That did not better for my life provide,
Than public means which public manners breeds,
Thence comes it that my name receives a brand,
And almost thence my nature is subdued,
To what it works in like the dyer's hand.

All this is now completely changed, as is shown conclusively by the circumstance that Sir Henry Irving has been honored by being raised to the dignity of a knight for his eminence as an actor. We are, in this respect, where Greece was when the drama had reached its highest perfection:—when Æschylus, who was an actor as well as dramatist, commanded as an officer on the field of Marathon, where his exploits and those of his brother were so remarkable that they were commemorated by a descriptive painting in the theater of Athens; when Neoptolemus, a celebrated tragic actor, was sent as one of the ambassadors to conclude a treaty of peace with Philip; when Aristodemus, another great tragic actor, was prominent in the political affairs of his time, was also employed upon an embassy, and, on the proposal of Demosthenes, was honored with a golden crown for his public services ;* and when Æschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles produced those plays that have ever since been the admiration of mankind.

* Smith's "Dictionary," Vol. i, p. 42; Calcraft, 67.

Dr. Franklin wished that he could, after a hundred years, return again to this earth to see what science in the meanwhile had accomplished, and could Collier return after the histrionic experience of the last two centuries, it would be to see how unfounded were his conclusions respecting the theater as an institution, and will ever be among any people while the nation remains in a healthy condition.

In conclusion, we may say of the drama, that with the four other arts of poetry, music, sculpture, and painting, it has been the natural outcome of civilization; that as things that are general have always their exceptions, there may have been races, as the Egyptians appear to have been, who, in the development of their civilization, showed no aptitude or desire for it; that its peculiar attraction is, as Lord Bacon says: "That it brings the past before us as if it were the present;" and as respects the present, that it is what Shakespeare and Addison declared it to be, the mirror of human nature.











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